

China

August – September, 2000

Beijing. For most foreigners Beijing is the city of Tiananmen Square and the MAOsoleum, the city of the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, of the summer residence and other catalogued attractions, for which, one can find information in any crumbled travel guide. There is no escape for such famous places to be infested by the parasitic service industries, which have one certain advantage: they move the money from the tourist's pocket toward the pockets of taxi drivers and street painters, guides and pickpockets, the liars and beggars. Therefore, for all such 'must-see-places' I can say only this: the organized group tourism is a tool able to turn every ordinary payer into abnormal idiot, as she or he is constantly exposed to the paranormal information, that "this palace is built by the Emperor Hui of Ming, later renovated by the great architect Mui; in 1652 the palace was destroyed by the eunuchs' revolt. The eunuchs brutally raped the beloved concubine and drowned her in a cauldron full of excrements, broken a century later by an enraged Mongol leader".

The System. In China, everything has its own system, which must be understood, if you want to survive. There is a system for searching and renting a room, a barrack or cabin; a system for buying bus or train tickets; a system for crossing by bicycle a 12-lane boulevard, on red light ... In other words, systems, for which the Chinese language is not so needed to understand them, than to follow them. This forced me to learn the numbers from one to a hundred, how to say 'hour' and 'minute', along with unnecessary phrases such as "Hello!", "Good bye!", and "Thank you.", and much more in need such as "How much?" and "manyo" - horse's urine - (hyper-swearing, the first in the Chinese top-list of imprecations). The Chinese people speak many dialects, but the main two vernaculars – Mandarin and Cantonese are alike, as the Italian and French are. If someone cannot understand you, she or he starts writing characters, which are universal and are supposed to be understood everywhere. That is, after trying to speak with someone for 20 minutes gesturing, finally the Chinese person pulls out a pencil and starts scribbling on a piece of paper.

The Forbidden City. You have to cross a huge space before entering the Forbidden City, which upon all cartographers' rules is supposed to be a kind of a park with two big lakes and the city itself walled in a typical for this latitude way. Beijing itself is an enormous city with huge streets and squares, arranging it in huge blocks. On the map, everything is placed in the middle of the block, and where the entrance is clear only to the locals. Everyone believing in the maps of China could make a major mistake if she or he decides to shorten his/her walk and go directly through the park. Every attempt to reach the Forbidden City in that way means to always stumble onto guarded gates. When you approach them the guards grab their guns with the typical gesture ¡No Pasarán! Only one street leads tourists to the park, where mainly the last models of Mercedes are driven, by slowing down at the asphalt twists, until the steel barriers in front of them get open. This is the beginning of the real forbidden city and the easiest way to conquer it is by the subway.

Luoyang. To take the night train Beijing – Luoyang opens up a whole paragraph on getting tickets along the rail stations in China. Every non-Chinese willing to use the Chinese railway system has to hold in advance a piece of paper with her or his final destination written in Chinese characters. Then she or he has to find the board and read the scheduled train. After that won't be bad to write down the train number you are going to travel by on the date you want and finally you have to push the paper in front of the ticket seller. The things can always end up well, except if you have chosen the slowest train or simply there are no tickets left. So, with lots of questions in Mandarin, masked by perfect Bulgarian, you can finally find that your train is No 152 and arrives on your rail station at 8:30 next day. And when after a month-long experience you learn, that the express trains have numbers between 100 and 200, the tourist trains' numbers start by Y, followed by three digits, and the local trains carry numbers between 500 and 600, you finally give up the idea to travel by Chinese trains.

The night train for Luoyang arrives at 9 am. Twenty Chinese attack me at the station exit, offering me a hotel and a trip to Shaolin, as if they were stock exchange agents. My refusal makes the crowd to start a scuffle because nobody knows who has spoiled the opportunity. Five minutes later I find the little shabby railroader's hotel, ditch the luggage and set out to explore Longmen, a Buddhist grottoes monastery, a 60-metres tall Buddha - another attraction.

In the evening I happen to be in a tripe-shop-like place with an unclear system for food orders. I try ordering randomly. I find out later that I have ordered jelly, pork ears, and something I do not dare to ask what it is. I realize the myth of Chinese allegedly eating rice and not drinking is dead. I decide not to get drunk on the first night, because it is bad and inconvenient to get lost late in the evening, as I am a stranger to the city. Most of the people pull out beer, brandy, or wine bought elsewhere and nobody makes a problem out of it. I ask the waiter's son to bring a 100-gram bottle of a kind of fruit brandy from the next shop. I stop ordering alcohol from the pubs' menu forever.

At 6:30 am somebody knocks at my hotel door. An elderly woman, who has taken part in the yesterday's melee at the railway station, again offers me a trip to Shaolin. The intelligence has tracked down where I stay – the woman simply wants to grab her chances first. I cut her short. Nobody offers me anything in Luoyang anymore.

Xi'an. I have to stay on the underground's floor of a large hotel. The cellar is in fact a neglected fallout shelter. The room smells of mould and turpentine, oil is dripping from the light. The night goes by extremely slowly.

The most convenient way to move around in multi-million cities is by bicycle. I rent the most common, the cheapest, strong, and old Chinese model - "Flying Pigeon" - and mend with the traffic. The two rightmost boulevard lanes are reserved only for bicyclists and ... buses. Nobody is amazed by that. Bicycles, rickshaws, tricycles, carts, kick scooters, and other vehicles of all sorts get together in huge swarms. The only way to survive is always to be at the swarm's centre, never at its periphery. Any foreigner willing to get in fight with a Chinese could hit his bicycle. Most of the bicycles constantly fail, which is a reason of developing a whole business niche on repairing. Old men occupy every 100 metres beside the alleys, charging cheap for repairing the Flying Pigeons' tires, spokes, and chains.

Lanzhou. A small city populated by several million Chinese and built in the huge gorge of the Yellow River. The myriad Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian temples dwell together with mosques since long time ago. Lanzhou as well as almost all other cities, excluding Beijing and Shanghai, is full of newly built skyscrapers. Usually, staying empty, uninhabited, and having massive glass doors locked up by thick bicycle chains. Some have guards, other are completely deserted. China is a huge state, with enormous fund flows, large buildings and tremendous corruption.

Xining. This is the capital city of Qinghai Province and a place for the Chinese dissidents, criminals and recidivists who serve their sentences. Tibetans call Xining Ziling – a part of the Amdo region. The fifty-year lasting conflict for this land is a local issue, but for the neutrals, the region is one of the gates for Tibet. It is full of forbidden zones to the North, South, and East. There is a desolated radioactive waste disposal facility to the West, next to the Koko Nor¹. The land around Koko Nor reminds a blend between the Wild West and scenes from "Mad Max". I buy a bus ticket. The scheme: asking in Bulgarian, pointing at my watch, maps and buses drawing, appealing to the driver, elbowing and kicking, swearing and tipping. I reach the bus, climb over its roof and lock my backpack with a bicycle lock to a strong metal bar. Every getting off the bus at an intermediate stop requires untangling of the entire luggage before reaching your lock. If your backpack is on the top of other luggage, it would definitely not look like before because of the rain, the oil and the gasoline, having dripped over it.

Matuo. I take the road to Matuo at 9 am. The driver gets his job ticket done and leaving the bus station starts stopping at every 100 m in order to get on passengers directly paying to him. We are on the 150th km six hours later. There are 350 more. The bus is full of Muslims who spit the sunflower seeds' shells on the floor. The seats are sewn, ripped open, sewn again, ripped again. The height in the bus space is enough for an average tall European with knee-amputated legs. All the passengers spit and piss en bloc. It is obvious that the main highway for Tibet is in fact a rough, graveled road. At 9 pm we reach a section under reconstruction, more than 150 km long. On Sunday, at 9 pm, a group of Chinese continues swinging picks under the floodlights.

We arrived in Matuo at 6 am. There is no hotel in the village. The driver takes me in his home. I sleep for three hours. An enraged tied dog waylays me next to the toilet, so I piss in the yard. I pay

1 Koko Nor literary means Blue Lake – translator's note

the driver for the sleep and go away.

Yushu. Outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, the ancient Tibetan regions Kham and Amdo are divided between several Chinese provinces. Yushu is the first large city of several thousands along my way. It is located in the Kham region. Locals tell me about the qualities of the tallest among all Asian people – the Khampa. All they are brave warriors, courageous brigands, and fearless bandits. Shortly, a valuable source of saboteur groups were sent against People's Liberation Army, before the Americans stopped their financial support for the fraternal Tibetan people in the early 60-s.

I travel hitchhiking. A Tibetan monk picks me up in his Pajero. While traveling with him, I answer myself where the money Dalai Lama gets from the West go. The monk drives me for 3-4 km. A peasant driving a tractor picks me up ten minutes later. I endure 15 km and get off. I continue on foot toward the Batang Valley. There, it is full of yurts, yaks, nomads, and dogs. There are only women and kids around a yurt. I enter inside. Nothing special – a stove, a cassette player, yak's milk, and also sujuk, blutwurst, and a bloody yak's head scattered on the floor.

I go back to Yushu hitchhiking. In the evening I sit at the village's centre. A Khampa approaches me and starts playing Tibetan folk music on his four-string guitar. People start to gather. The pub of a Tibetan Muslim communist is nearby. One-meter portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Deng Xiaoping hang on the walls. Tibetans quietly drink tea under the severe looks of the Communist leaders.

A village. I never found its name, not mentioned on the map either. The last passing by tourist was here 3 months ago. People gather around me and pull me; thickly mud-covered beggars climb my limbs.

The locals offer me to play cards in the pub. The first ten games teach me the rules. It is suspicious but I keep winning all the time. At the moment they decide that I am theirs, the men raise up their bets and insist very much to gamble again. I refuse. They angrily knock several cups down and stand up from the table. I do not understand how comes that in this tucked away hamlet of twenty houses in the middle of the Tibetan Plateau people can pull out so much cash.

Manigango. I arrive to a place 2 km before Manigango, traveling with no ticket. The bus is overloaded. The furious conductress threw us out - about twenty people, and commands shouting to walk on foot. Inside the bus stay only people holding tickets, having their seats. We separate in four groups and start entering the village as if we were partisans - from the North, from the South, across the river, and through the centre. Most of the thrown out people stop at 2 km after the village in order to get on the bus again. I stay behind. Manigango is the stop I need.

I try to hitchhike someone for the next 100 km after Manigango. Nobody agrees. I enter the nearby pub to warm myself. Very soon a descent son of the Khampa rushes into the pub. I am 1.90 m approximately and feel as a gnome. The native is over 2 m tall and barely squeezes through the door. He hitchhikes, but in another direction. I go back to the barrack in Manigango and tell about the Khampa I saw to the two Buddhists (a New Zealander and a Belgian) heading to the nearby monastery. After breakfast, the New Zealander starts to search the toilet. His Tibetan-English phrase book is rubbish. I bet that if I ask in Bulgarian, the locals would understand me better. Few colourful sounds and gestures later, someone directs the New Zealander to the right place. He comes back amazed and says: "Do you know, your Khampa has probably visited the same toilet. There is at least half-meter shit inside". My Khampa's name was Ando. The names here sound very close to the Bulgarian ones. They remind of Toncho or Tancho for instance.

Kanding. It is located at the imaginary border between China and Kham, Sichuan Province. The city is in the gorge of a small river, which frequently plays a dramatic trick to the locals, becoming threateningly powerful and taking away from the city whatever possible. It is true that all large rivers in East Asia (the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, the Mekong River) originate out of Tibet. So East Kham, with its myriad wooden houses, turns out being one of the reasons causing the enormous floods from Central China, to Laos and Cambodia. A typical view in the whole Tibetan Plateau is the one of a little brooklet incising to a 100-200 m depth into the mountainous terrain, which is eroded enough so that in a few thousand years a little Grand Canyon would be formed. This is probably the only reason to limit drastically logging in the Kham woods and to forest the hill

cuttings again.

Out of curiosity, I enter the local elementary school. Kids and teachers get out in the yard. A group of pioneer pupils starts hanging on my clothes and jumping nearby. We take several pictures of ourselves, that I later send them. I leave the school with difficulty. I find out later, that the local guides offer this kind of attraction as a service from their catalog. I do not understand them much.

Chengdu. The largest city in the Sichuan Province is unimpressive. I try to understand the local people all the time. The Chinese are incredibly shy but curious. Starting a conversation with only one is enough to draw, as if under command, nearly three hundred others, in order to learn something from “the outside”, to take pictures, or if necessary to give advice over an issue to someone. However, the language is an obstacle even for foreigners speaking Chinese. Years ago, one of the few Europeans working in Beijing, went to see the Ming nobles' graves. He decided to ask a few old men about the direction: “Where are the graves of the Ming dynasty rulers?” - he asked twice or three times in perfect Mandarin. The old men did not give any answer. Walking away, the European overheard the old men commenting: - Did you hear what kind of strange language this man spoke? It seemed as though he was asking “Where are the graves of the Ming dynasty rulers?” in Chinese.

Beijing. The Great Wall of China. The most visited section is at Badaling. You pay entrance fee, buy souvenirs, hire a guide, jostle with the crowd along the meticulously renovated towers and finally leave the place, in order to tell all that at home. Huanghua (The Yellow Flower) is only 60 km and two hours away from Beijing. There is no entrance fee here, neither souvenirs, nor visitors, only The Wall, as it is. There are nearly ten towers covered by grass and herbs. The wall is visible form kilometers. A big dam has stretched in the wall's foundation, where the concrete is poured out for the future hotels, restaurants and buildings. I continue farther. I hurry up because I know that who has not seen these places so far would never ever see them.